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ABSTRACT

An experiment concerning Japanese college students' ability to express themselves in English to non-Japanese English-speakers is reported. Freshmen and sophomores at two Japanese four-year colleges were asked to give written English responses to six specific communicative situations. Results showed that while few of the responses were unintelligible, they varied greatly. Few repetitions were found, but spelling and grammar formations were frequently different from standard forms. Responses varied consistently by college in the variety and frequency of reference to self, and students of one college provided more responses than those of the other college. However, in general the students appeared to be sensitive to the different conditions of the situations, suggesting that cultural barriers to teaching meaningful communication may not be as great as expected. (MSE)

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ON THE POTENTIAL FOR MEANINGFUL COMMUNICATION IN JAPANESE COLLEGE CLASSROOMS

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Introduction

This paper reports an experiment conducted to determine if Japanese college students are able to express themselves in ways that are comprehensible to non-Japanese English speakers. Students were asked to provide written responses to specified situations, and the responses were analysed. Writing was selected as the mode of expression due to the great difficulty the students display when attempting to produce spoken English. As a result it is concluded that students are able to respond in ways that would not be alien or foreign to non-Japanese speakers.

Background

Students graduating from high school and entering college generally show little ability to express themselves verbally in English. For the continuing English study in college, native Japanese instructors generally respond to the limited oral proficiency by having students read and translate material that to a non-Japanese appears very complex and of limited utility in learning to use and understand English in its modern forms.

For the non-Japanese instructor with a less than complete knowledge of Japanese, this teaching situation poses a number of problems. It would be possible to follow the example of the Japanese instructor, but the seemingly limited utility of this approach, and the need for the instructor to be an expert English-Japanese translator often makes this choice unattractive. Teaching English for communication and use may be meaningful, but the students' inability to express even simple sentiments makes it difficult to know whether this is a desirable approach, even when discussion with students reveal that they do wish to know English that can be used to communicate with non-Japanese.

The instructor wishing to determine what English teaching is

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possible as general education at colleges is faced with students who are unable to express themselves in English, are poor at understanding spoken English, and know few strategies to maintain communication with non-Japanese speakers. This makes it difficult to explore student abilities and wishes through the target language, English.

As students have studied English for at least six years before they enter college, this situation may lead the instructor to conclude that Japanese students are pathologically unable to speak English. Some Japanese have reached this conclusion and consider that thought patterns are different, and that spoken English is the province of non-Japanese only (Miller, 1982).

The following is the report of an attempt to explore whether Japanese students are able to express themselves in English. Students were given a specific task to complete in written English, to establish whether they can use English as a medium of expression. The tasks reported here concern what to say to people in specified situations and to people introduced through pictures only, further the listing of objects in a picture as well as objects that possibly could be in a picture. The responses were analysed to determine their relevance and other qualitites.

The general conclusion is that the students surveyed here were able to react in ways that are understandable to non-Japanese and that they showed a sense for time and place that would not be unexpected in non-Japanese users of English. There were further a liberal number of responses that showed humor or a wish to talk about matters not directly related to the situation, much like in real-life interpersonal communication.

The responses were written and it would be possible to argue that the students do not consider them real, not related to real-life situations. However, talking to the students about the responses, in English, appeared to show that the students did consider the responses useable and communicative.

Data

The data reported here was collected from freshmen and sophomores at two four year colleges in Sapporo, Japan. Students were asked to give five written English responses to specific situations as follows:

1) The student imagines he or she is at a hospital/clinc and

has to report how to speak to a) the doctor, b) a nurse, and c) a neighbor in the waiting room.

2) The student is asked to report what to say to three figures appearing in a four picture cartoon (Fig. 1) a man smoking a cigar, b) a waiter, and c) a little man with a long nose.

3) The student has been passed over for promotion and is angry how would that be expressed to the manager?

4) The student meets a scuba diver (rich and young), what would the student say to him?

5) The student is asked to list five things in a drawing (Fig. 2).

6) The student is asked to report five things that are not visible in a drawing of an office, and indicate where these things are (Fig. 3).

This selection was made from a larger body of data, and avoids repetition as well as it keeps the amount of data manageable. The situations are related to the lessons in the textbook used for examinations (Hill, 1980 and 1981), or the material used for examinations (Hill 1980, Petersen 1979). The data was collected in the period February 1984 to April 1985. When responses were elicited at examinations students were not able to assist each other, however where the assigment was part of the study in the weekly classes there was some mutual help and dictionaries were used.

The situations presented here were selected to represent varying degrees of familiarity and difficulty. The first situation requires the student to deal with a complex (doctor, nurse, fellow patient) and potentially unpleasant situation (a hospital waiting room), not part of the students everyday but not so far removed either. The second situation is funny, unreasonable, and slightly unexpected, the student is asked to deal with very unusual people in a setting that is possibly familiar. In situation three the student is asked to imagine being angry and upset in response to aggravating treatment by a superior, perhaps a situation it would be difficult to relate to and provide responses for. Situation four concerns an attractive person (rich, scuba diver) and it may be guessed that the student would find much to talk about with this person. Situation five requires a simple listing

of items present in a drawing. Situation six requires the invention of things not present and may be seen as more difficult and complex, requiring some inventiveness by the student.

The students are requested to respond to situations that have unknown or unusual elements. Completely predictable, unsurprising situations have not been included here, in such situations the responses showed little variety and the assignments appeared easy to complete. The situations presented here attempt to create situations where responses are not entirely straightforward or simple (this perhaps except situation 5).

The classes consisted of 50-70 students, all economics or management majors with limited experience with English. The writer was the instructor, and for the majority of the students it was the first occasion to have a non-Japanese teacher. The students had some difficulty to say anything English without support from the written word, and the procedure reported here, writing down of responses, was selected to make production easier, and to individualize the English the student was using.

While students were working on an assignment it was possible to discuss the individual student's responses with this student. The written responses were handed in and graded in addition to being used as the data here.

The data was sorted into groups based on form (1, 2, 3, and 4) or object considered (5 and 6) to facilitate a better overview of the responses. The total number of responses for one question was 200-300 each student providing up to five examples. Two classes were analysed for situations one and two, giving over 500 items for each of the six sets of responses here.

The Analysis

Few of the responses were unintelligible (about one in 150), there was a wide variety of responses (different topics, grammatical forms etc.) with few repetitions, but spelling and grammar was frequently different from the standard forms. The students from one of the colleges was consistently less repetitive (fewer students with same response) more inventive (employed a greater variety of topics) and used fewer references to self (sentences with "I" as the subject).

The responses for the six situations considered here may be summarized as follows:

1) The student is in a hospital/clinic and the assignment is to detail what to say to:

a) the doctor

The most common responses: how old are you, do you like music (the studied material was concerned with the doctor and music), and why did you become a doctor. A wide variety of responses addressed the doctor not only in his private roles. There were irate sounding orders as well as pleading. Music (the topic of the story studied) was taken up by about one third of the students.

b) a nurse:

The most common responses: how old are you and how tall are you, for one of the classes. The other class had a greater variety of responses with no single response appearing more than three times. The students took the nurse to be young and female and this elicited many responses although most had some mention of an illness and also complaints about the waiting time.

c) a neighbor:

The most common responses: how old are you, what's your name, and where do you come from. Responses showed that the students assumed to be dealing with fellow patients and that they were suffering together in the crowded waiting room. Many used the opportunity for small talk and idle observations.

2) What to say to the three figures in the cartoon (Fig. 1),

a) the man smoking the cigar:

The most common responses: how old are you, how do you do, where do you come from, and no smoking here. The students showed great interest in the man's smoking and drinking, and there was a wide variety of questions addressed to this person. The appearance and actions of the man met with some disapproval and there were a number of simple clear statements showing little respect for the man.

b) the waiter:

The most common responses: how do you do, thank you,

and how old are you. The waiter was given orders for food and drink and told to watch his actions as well as deal with the flies. There were requests to be shown the toilet, telephone, or the bill and overall the students seemed quite at ease dealing with the waiter.

c) the little man with the long nose:

The most common responses: how old are you, what are you doing (here), who are you, and how tall are you. This person puzzled the students considerably and they had trouble making out whether it is a penguin, child, or duck. There were numerous queries about this little man and what he is doing, and many responses discussed the ever present flies.

3) Passed over for promotion, what to say to the manager:

The most common responses: I hope to be promoted please, you are crazy, you are not kind. About 40% start with the speaker pleading ("I" is the subject), 25% are accusations ("you" is the subject). The remaining are exclamations, questions, opinions, or remarks not directly relevant to the situation (don't smoke, my desk is dirty). The students took some time to complete this assignment and the responses generally show anger or hurt.

4) Speaking to the rich, young scuba diver:

The most common responses: how old are you, do you like the sea, and how tall are you. The majority of the responses, over 90%, addressed the diver asking about matters related to diving or his person. The remaining were taken up by exclamations, greetings, and a few references to the questions.

5) Objects in a picture (Fig. 2):

The students were asked to list five objects, and all discernible objects in the picture were mentioned. The most frequently mentioned were: house, tree (not specifically mentioned while studying), boy, lady, and ball. Least mention was made of window, shows, and paper. This assignment was completed quickly.

6) Things that may be in an office but are not visible in the picture (Fig. 3):

Pens and pictures were the most commonly suggested objects. Objects were suggested to be near one of the objects in the drawing, in pockets, or near the office. Most students could not invent five non-present objects and they used the objects in the drawing to complete the quota of five. Generally they provided two or more invented objects with the balance made up by objects in the picture.

Discussion

College freshmen and sophomores were asked to provide a set number of written English responses to specified situations. There were no other restrictions placed on the kind of response expected of the student. Writing was selected as the students have great difficulty in expressing themselves orally in English. The responses were requested to determine if students are able to respond in English and to determine what responses students would select.

The results show that students are able to provide responses in English, not all students provided the requested number of responses but all students provided some. The responses were generally simply understandable, although spelling and grammar was not always correct.

Some responses appeared with considerable frequency regardless of the situation, how old are you, how tall are you, and what is your name are representative of these. These would rarely be used in similar situations in some of the countries where English is the first language and it may be necessary to warn against using these questions too liberally.

In addition to responses that refer to the situation, there was a considerable number of greetings and exclamations as well as irrelevant but plausible responses. This seems to show that students are aware of the value and possibility of not adhering strictly to a topic.

The classes in the experiment here were at two different colleges, and the responses were consistently different in variety and frequency of reference to the respondent. Responses from one college provided more responses than the students at the second college.

The responses to the six situations may be summerized as follows:

In situation 1) the students dealt with the doctor as a medical practitioner and music lover (as described in the material studied), the nurse was seen to be kindly and to be able to attend to illnesses, and the neighbor in the waiting room appeared as a fellow patient. The figures in the cartoon (situation 2 Fig. 1) were more difficult for the students to deal with. The lack of a clearly identifying name for the little man made the students unsure. The smoking man was easier to deal with although the students did not seem to like him particularly, and appeared to have trouble understanding just what he is up to. The waiter was scolded for poor work and given orders without any restraints.

Expressing anger/disappointment over the lack of promotion (situation 3) the responses pleaded and made accusations with high frequency. It took considerable effort and time for the students to complete this assignment. Talking to the young, rich scuba diver the students forgot themselves and asked about him and his sport.

Asked to name things in a picture (situation 5, Fig. 2) all available objects were into use. However, when asked to mention objects that were not in a picture (situation 6, Fig. 3), but could possibly be there, the students had difficulty inventing unseen objects.

In conclusion it may be stated that the students were sensitive to the different conditions of the situations reported here. The responses show that students observe the possibilities there are for communication and display interest in the other party not just as an actor with duties to perform but also as a person. The instructor may conclude that despite the poor verbal abilities the students are potentially able to use English in these situations.

The problem for the instructor is to determine what method of study will help the student best, and what end result is desireable. However, the instructor need not be unduly concerned that situations like those reported here are foreign to Japanese and require special instruction in alien manners and ways. The instructor may approach the teaching without being unduly concerned that learning will be difficult because of cultural barriers.

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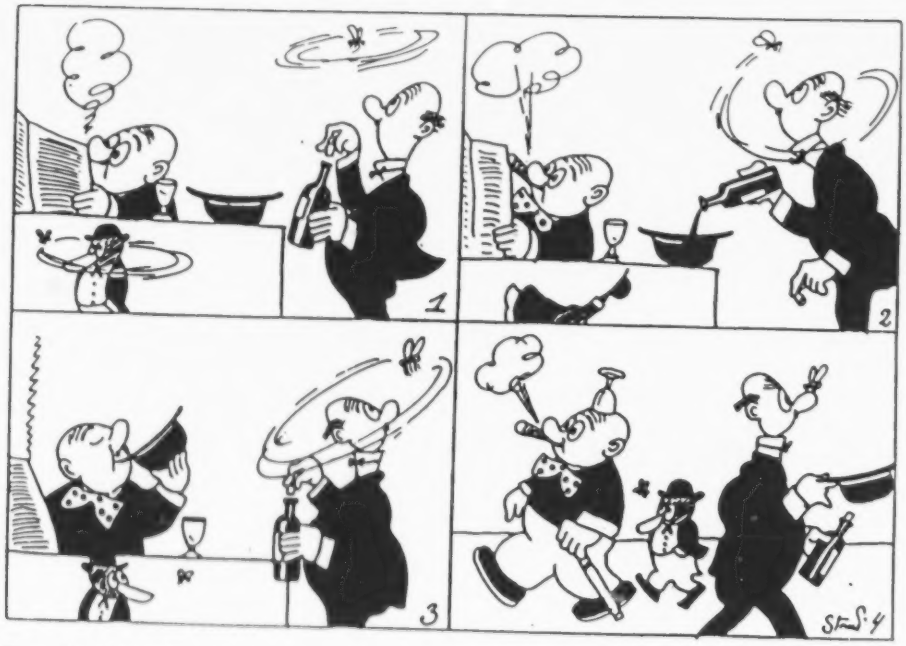

Fig. 1: Situation two.

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Fig. 2: Situation five.

Fig. 3: Situation six.

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